DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 397 928 JC 960 563

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TITLE Building Global Learning Communities through the Internet.
PUB DATE 28 May 96
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, May 26-28, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; Community Colleges; *Computer Mediated Communication; Course Descriptions; *Distance Education; Educational Technology; *Electronic Mail; Foreign Countries; Inservice Teacher Education; *Internet; *Marketing; Online Systems; Program Development; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS *Cambrian College (Canada)

ABSTRACT

From Spring 1995 to Spring 1996, Cambrian College, in Ontario (Canada), undertook a project to develop Canada's first full program using Internet technology. The major challenges accomplished included the selection of the program; adaptation of materials for digital delivery; selection of a delivery technology; faculty training; and program marketing, delivery, and evaluation. First, a certificate program for teachers of adults was chosen as the pilot program for Internet delivery due to the existing integration of teleconferencing and independent learning methods. Electronic mail was selected for the delivery technology, specifically the conferencing software known as the "mailing list" since it provides almost universal accessibility. Faculty for the course were recruited for their experience with distance education, while most of the 3-week online training focused on cultural rather than technical issues, such as methods for showing emphasis in electronic text, the use of humor, and the level of commitment necessary to maintain a virtual class. The program was primarily marketed through a gopher site, registering 297 "hits," of which 90 were interested enough to examine the online registration form. Finally, the delivery of the program affected the institution in several ways, from a restructuring of the fee structure for international students in recognition of the global nature of online instruction to significant demands made on the college's Information Systems and Registrar's offices. (TGI)

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ED 397 928

Building Global Learning Communities Through the Internet

Paper Presented At

Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Community Colleges

May 28, 1996

Toronto, Ontario

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The nineties are certainly interesting times for educational institutions, as they are for everyone in just about every business or service. Phrases like "paradigm shift" constantly flow across our screens, over our pages, through our airwaves. New challenges take many forms: budget cuts, new technologies, social instability. Colleges and universities, like all institutions and service providers, must adapt themselves or be left behind. This paper presents a case study of one way that one college is dealing with the new technology of the Internet. New technologies always present new threats, as well as new opportunities. If we do not see past the threats, we will be unable to seize the opportunities. As Richard Lanham (1993) so aptly expressed it, "If we decide once again to view technology with a hostile eye, this time we may find ourselves making the pianos while someone else makes the music."

In this paper we will examine the major events that took place over approximately one year, from the spring of 1995 to the spring of 1996. It was during this time that Cambrian College became the first college in Canada to offer a full program using Internet technology. These are the major tasks that were accomplished: program selection, adaptation of materials for digital delivery, selection of a delivery technology, faculty training, program marketing, program delivery and evaluation. In an ideal world these tasks would have been finished in some kind of logical fashion, but, in our world, they got done as they got done. Of course, this paper is a description of doing something for the first time. Naturally enough, certain barriers presented themselves; some barriers were anticipated and others were unanticipated. All were interesting.

The underlying theme of this paper is this: If you wish to achieve anything on the Internet, it is of primary importance that you understand the culture of the Internet. The technologies themselves, while they may present certain challenges, are of little significance compared to the

mastery of Internet culture. What does it matter that you have prepared an attractive, user-friendly digital text, if you inadvertently give offence to the Internet community when you attempt to market that text?

We selected our Teachers of Adults Certificate program as our pilot program for Internet delivery. We chose this program for sound reasons: We had been successfully delivering it via teleconferencing and independent learning for about a decade, and it is largely text-based (and thus should have presented minimal problems in conversion to a digital format).

Text conversion became the largest technical challenge to overcome. We originally decided to deliver pure ascii text to our online learners. Ascii is the lowest common denominator and is therefore compatible with all e-mailers. So we first converted the program, which consists of eight modules, to pure ascii. The only negative feedback we got from our learners had to do with the crudeness of ascii text, so, long before the first year of delivery was over, we converted the program for a second time, in this case to the much more sophisticated Envoy format. The original text was done on desktop publishing software that no longer exists, so both conversions were monumental tasks. Text conversion was not an integral part of building learning communities, but it was the biggest, most frustrating and most expensive part of our work. Needless to say, it was one of the barriers that was unanticipated.

For our delivery technology, we chose e-mail, specifically the rather crude conferencing software known as the "mailing list." Some Internet users would scorn to use the mailing list as a tool for program delivery, but, again, it has the advantage of universal accessibility. A mailing list will deliver to any mailer on the Internet. There is no need to be concerned with software compatibility. We decided to train our faculty using the same technology that we would use for

delivery. This would accomplish two goals simultaneously: It would familiarize the faculty with the delivery technology, and it would allow us the opportunity to "test drive" the technology before we used it with our learners. We were successful in fulfilling both of these goals.

We established a mailing list called TOAFAC-L (Teachers of Adults Faculty List). At first we enjoyed the co-operation of Humber College in managing this list for us. At the time, we didn't have our own listserv software. So Humber College became an extremely important part of our growing learning community.

Our faculty were recruited for their experience in the more conventional distance delivery of the Teachers of Adults program. Their levels of computer literacy were very different. All had used computers, at least for word processing. Some had accessed the Internet, but none could be described as skilled Internet navigators. They all had to learn enough e-mail basics to be able to engage in a minimal level of e-mail interaction. They all had to learn about Internet culture.

We began with some entertaining, non-threatening, yet important information: smileys and acronyms. The faculty obviously enjoyed learning this. They immediately began, not only to use basic and advanced smileys, but to create their own smileys for their own purposes. They also quickly perceived the value of simple acronyms, such as BTW and IMO (By The Way and In My Opinion). I knew that they would encounter such short cuts to communication as soon as they began online delivery. If they were unfamiliar with them, they might undermine their credibility as program faculty.

We could not avoid certain technical requirements. They had to configure their mailers, and they had to do this very early in the training program. We were using the PINE mailer, which is not as friendly as Eudora or Pegasus, or other Windows-based mailers. There are multiple

screens to the PINE configuration menu, and the menu items are not clickable. All training was done online, so it was important to write instructions that were brief and clear. Of greatest importance was the creation and configuration of a signature file. We would clearly have embarrassed ourselves if our faculty were exchanging e-mail with learners and not incorporating signature files. Signature files are one of the essential features of good Netiquette.

Most of the online training, which lasted about three weeks, focussed on cultural rather than technical issues. For example, we stressed the use of the asterisk as a means of emphasis in electronic text, where bolding and underlining are not possible. We also mentioned the use of capital letters as a means of emphasizing text. At the same time, we made it clear that the overuse of capitals online is called "shouting," and shouting is considered offensive by all Internet citizens.

The dangers of using humour and irony online are evident to all experienced communicators in cyberspace. Without body language cues, humour (and, especially, irony) can be easily misunderstood and can therefore cause offence. At the same time, humour is essential to human interaction, so the faculty learned about how to safely be funny or even ironic in computer mediated communication. Such devices as the tongue-in-cheek smiley were used. The tongue-in-cheek smiley is the ;-) smiley (the semi-colon smiley). It is one means by which we can introduce a certain "comic leaven" (Lanham, 1993) into the world of work.

Minimum level of commitment is a significant part of online teaching. Since the class does not exist in real time and space, then what is your level of commitment, as a faculty member? How many times a week do you check your e-mail? What days of the week? What will you do if you are temporarily unable to meet your minimal commitment? The answers to such questions must be clearly presented to the learners, and the defined commitments must be met.

At the end of the training period, reviews and "tests" were given. The tests, of course, consisted simply of performing the tasks that online delivery would demand of the faculty. The mailing list remained open, and remains open to this day, as a place for faculty to discuss online teaching issues, to get support for technical and andragogical problems, and to engage in general discussion (Christmas and other holiday messages of good will are common). There is no question that a community of learners has been formed on this mailing list.

Our faculty, it seemed, were prepared for the "fluid world" of the Internet (Hiltz and Turoff, 1993). Now we had to market the program so they could practice their newfound skills.

Marketing the program was a crucial and delicate step. It was not time-consuming, nor was it expensive, but there is considerable risk involved in online marketing. There are strong taboos against advertising in most online communities. The penalty for giving offence online, even to only one user, can be severe. Each user has the capacity, with very little effort, to post negative messages to hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands of people. You must know Internet culture very well before marketing any product or service.

The marketing resources at your disposal are powerful, if accessed with skill. You can market an educational program in any number of mailing lists, Usenet newsgroups, and Special Interest Groups. You can also link your program Web site to Internet pointers.

You do not risk giving offence when linking to pointers. Software is not easily offended. But when you post a public announcement, you must post with care. In no sense must your posting be an advertisement. It must be a true announcement of a service, and you must bring the service to the attention only of those communities that are likely to wish to avail themselves of the service. Be polite. Be brief. Offer only essential information. Provide a helpful URL for those

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who are interested. Provide a name and e-mail address for those who are even more interested.

We were pleased with the results of our first attempt at Internet marketing. Even though we were operating only a gopher site at the time (we now have a more attractive and accessible Web site), we got 297 "hits" from around the world on our department home file. Of these, almost one-third (90) were interested enough to look at our online registration form.

A large number of people responded by e-mail. We got thirty-four requests for information from Canada, seventeen from the United States and twelve from the rest of the world.

During the first year of online delivery, all of our learners were Canadian. Many of them were living abroad (in Hong Kong and Zimbabwe, for example), but all were Canadian. This brings us to the important issue of institutional impacts. Cambrian College, not just the Distance Education Department, had to reform itself into a new community to serve the new online global learner.

One of the reasons we were not able to attract international learners to our program is that our international fees were very high (approximately four times the fee for Canadian learners). So the College had to examine its international fee structure. After the process, international fees were dropped considerably. Other divisions of the College, notably International Programs, were impacted and, naturally, had to be part of the decision-making.

Two other areas of the College were directly involved in changes needed to accommodate the new learner. The demands made on Information Systems were considerable. At the beginning of the planning process, we had only VAX e-mail. We had no gopher site, much less a Web site. Our hard drive space was very limited, but we needed to provide our faculty with new accounts, accounts of considerable size, since they would be transferring student assignments into

and through them. We received all the support needed from Information Systems, including the hiring of one full-time technical support person (who is available as a resource for the entire College, not just Distance Education).

The Registrar's Office was also directly involved in delivery issues. We all learned many new things. For example, we learned that Hong Kong phone numbers have eight digits, not seven. The telephone number field in our student information system can accommodate only seven digits. We learned that there is such a thing as an "international" credit card. The PIN of such a card is not compatible with many record keeping systems. We learned that our software has no field for a student e-mail address, the single most important piece of information that we need to deliver a program to an online learner.

All of these learning experiences brought what was to be expected: some initial pain and some long-term gain. All of them helped mold an emerging learning community, a local learning community whose function it is to support our online learning community.

We kept our end-of-year evaluation form very simple. It consisted of only two questions: How has this course met your expectations? How has this course not met your expectations? The two questions were accompanied by an explanatory message detailing the importance of learner feedback to us in this, our initial foray into Internet delivery.

I have already mentioned that one student requested more sophisticated, malleable text than ascii. By the time we received this suggestion, we were already deeply involved in producing a Windows-compatible text.

All other evaluations were positive. Here is a typical evaluation response: "I certainly think it was successful.... I found the whole thing pretty neat. Extremely convenient, too."

It is obvious that the new global learner appreciates flexibility. Internet technology provides maximum flexibility with great ease of access to online support. In other words, e-mail is better than a telephone call. You will connect on the first attempt, and you will know when to expect a response (because of the minimum level of commitment on the part of the faculty).

We feel that we have succeeded in creating various kinds of new learning communities. We have re-created our College in a way that better serves all our learners, even our on-campus mainstream learners. We have created a vital group of faculty who are conversant with new delivery technologies. Most importantly, we are serving a new global community with an educational program that combines high quality with maximum learner-centredness.

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